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ABSTRACT

With the publication of "A Nation at Risk," public education suddenly became a top national political priority. This report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned of a wide range of educational shortcomings. Among these were: 13 percent of 17-year-olds are functionally illiterate, high school students graduate with more vocational than academic subjects, secondary school students are unable to draw inferences from written material or solve mathematics problems requiring several steps, and the number of unqualified teachers is increasing. To reverse this trend the commission urged stiffer graduation requirements, periodic progress testing, tougher college admission standards, longer school days and years, and better teaching salaries. Public reaction to this report varied. President Reagan responded by visiting schools, speaking at education conventions, and urging minor reforms. Several authorities on education pointed out the report's omission of America's educational successes, such as increased preschool and college attendance, decreased dropout rate, and recently improving test scores. Conservatives found satisfaction in the report, pinpointing the legislative drive for equality and desegregation as a major cause of the educational decline. Other observers urged that the educational revival sparked by this report be acted upon to improve the educational system. (LP)

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Behind "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform"

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Behind A Nation at Risk:
The Imperative for Educational Reform

By Franklin Parker

After long neglect and with vast publicity accompanying A Nation at Risk, public education suddenly became a top national political priority. This report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, appointed by Education Secretary T. H. Bell, contained dire warnings:

> The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. We have, in effect, been committing an unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. History is not kind to idlers.[1]

Education shortcomings in the report were touted in the media, adding to the strange lag in public awareness that test scores have improved and that many state and local school boards have set tougher standards. In the report, education faults were starkly presented:

> Thirteen percent of all 17-year-olds, perhaps 40% of minority youth, are functionally illiterate. On 19 achievement tests in 21 nations, U.S. students never finished first or second and were last seven times. Average test scores were

higher in 1957 before Sputnik than now. Between 1963-80, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) verbal scores fell over 50 points, math fell 36 points. During 1969-81, high school graduates took less English, Government, Western Civilization, Algebra, and French, and more Driver Education, General Social Studies, Marriage and Adulthood, Foods, and Cooking, Health and Physical Education.

Nearly 40% of today's 17-year-olds cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-third can solve a math problem requiring several steps. Between 1975-80, four-year public colleges increased remedial math courses 72%. Other nations' students in grade six spend over three times more than Americans spend in studying math, biology, chemistry, physics, and geography. One-fourth of recent U.S. Navy recruits cannot read at the ninth grade level, considered minimum for safety instruction. High schools in only eight states in 1980 required foreign languages. Only half of new English, math, and science teachers are qualified. Fewer than a third of U.S. high schools offer physics taught by qualified teachers.[2]

To reverse school decline, the Commission report recommended for high school graduation four years of English; three years each of math, science, and social studies; a half year of computer science; and two years of foreign language for the college-bound. It urged periodic tests to certify progress, tougher four-year college admissions standards (20% of public colleges now accept any high school graduate), longer school day from six to seven hours;

longer school year from 180 to 220 days; and higher pay to attract better students to teaching, more pay for superior teachers, and 11-month contract to allow time to improve courses.[3]

Noting unexpected public interest in the Commission report, White House aides had President Reagan, who had not visited a public school since taking office, to visit several. He spoke at education conventions and hastily arranged to greet at the White House teachers of the year from each state. He avoided hard questions on financing school reform. Instead, he urged pet issues Congress has so far rejected: merit pay, tuition tax credit, vouchers, and school prayer.[4]

President Ernest L. Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching faulted the report for not mentioning recent tests showing that students' math and reading skills have improved since the mid-1970s. He said the Commission's "dark picture is overly simplified."[5]

Ben J. Wattenberg pointed out that the report omitted these examples of American education's successes: preschool attendance rose from 37% to 57%, 1970-83; high school dropouts fell from 39% to 14%, 1960-83; the percentage of young people graduating from college doubled in 20 years; engineering graduates increased from 64,000 to 88,000, 1970-80; funding for all education rose from $25 billion to $200 billion, 1960-82; and those earning master's and doctor's degrees rose 38%, 1961-81.[6]

Wrote Wattenberg: our students don't compare well with European students because European scores, based on selective education systems, reflect only bright students' scores. More of ours complete high school and go to college. Our scores are an

average of our bright and not so bright. The average European teenager is out of school, working. He concluded: "The President and the Secretary of Education like [the Commission report] because they say it proves liberalism has failed."[7]

Harvard's Education Dean Patricia Graham attributed U.S. academic decline to the fact that educators were given such non-academic tasks as desegregating schools and aiding the handicapped. Writer Ellen Goodman pointed out that a great many Americans rose on the so-called "tide of mediocrity." Stanford's Education Dean Myron Atkin wrote, "We can't lose sight of how much leveling up there has been" in American education.[7] A Nation writer thus explained why education has emerged as a political issue:

> Education Secretary Terrel Bell set up the commission two years ago to prove a political point that President Reagan and like-minded conservatives had been making for some time: public schooling in America has been seriously subverted by liberal theorists of educational permissiveness and of racial (and cultural) integration....The turmoil of the 1960s gave birth to educational reforms that were experimental, undisciplined, even chaotic--but innovative and enriching as well. The values and attitudes of the Reagan years are repressive, conformist and competitive.[9]

The Commission report gave some conservatives satisfaction in analyzing where the public schools had gone wrong. Writer Patrick Buchanan explained:

> What happened to American education is that somewhere, about a quarter century ago, the idea of excellence was

displaced by the egalitarian ethic. Equality of funding for schools and the racial composition of the classroom became more vital considerations than whether learning was taking place.

Every child can be taught; no child must be allowed to fail. So class pace had to be slowed by teachers to accommodate the dullest students. Children should be encouraged to express themselves, so dress codes and uniforms were cast out as obsolete and oppressive. There is no such thing as a bad boy; therefore, reasoning with the child replaced the birch ranch.[10]

This critic charged that public schools are a monopoly. He explained:

The egalitarian ideology maintains its iron control over public education because it has seized the commanding heights in an institution to which government has granted and guaranteed a monopoly. America's public school children are economic and political captives of the Educational Establishment.[11]

A more balanced observer, Karen MacPherson, noted that the states had been forced to respond to cuts in federal aid to education. She wrote:

The states now are beginning to fill the financial void left by the Reagan Administration's cuts in education in 1981 and 1982.

In addition to pumping millions of additional dollars into education, the states are passing educational reform

packages, which attempt to improve teacher pay and beef up school curriculums and requirements...[as in] California, Florida, and North Carolina.[12]

American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker explained that governors, legislators, and business people, wanting to attract new industry to their states, know they cannot do so without good schools. Public school reform is now part of a larger national reform effort. Our economic leadership and place in the world can only be assured by investing wisely in human resources. Polls show that people will tax themselves more for schools if added taxes are tied to improved school quality.[13]

Education writer Fred M. Hechinger wondered why polls show low public confidence in schools when the facts show improved reading scores, tightened academic requirements, and rising SAT scores after a decade of steady decline.[14] His explanation is that, after unlimited expansion and optimism, the nation and its schools were shocked in the 1970s at decline and retrenchment. Communities which built new schools in the fifties now close them. Such surgery is painful for a nation whose youth group is smaller and whose growing older population is worried by income decline because of inflation and international competition. The decline of public confidence in schools is part of a national malaise about losing world leadership in industry, technology, and trade. This pessimism accounts for the strident rhetoric that blames schools for social ills. Thus, recent school improvement has not reached public consciousness.

But a popular forum has emerged with education a definite 1984 political issue. The way to keep the education revival going is to

define what skills are basic and to teach them without excuse, to link tax support with assured school quality, to change the teacher's role from a hired hand to a professional master teacher with commensurate salary and status, to have successful schools that are islands of excellence help those that are weak, to get colleges and universities to interact more beneficially with public schools, to expand the industry and business adopt-a-school plan, and above all to affirm the federal role as essential catalyst to meet critical needs. The American dream cannot survive unless public education keeps open the avenues to success, regardless of one's origin. Education, Hechinger says, is the last frontier.[15]

Notes

1. Ellie McGrath, "To Stem a 'Tide of Mediocrity,'" Time, May 9, 1983, pp. 62-63.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Anne C. Lewis, "Washington Report: Reports Reawaken Interest in Federal Role; Political Will to Act Still Slumbers," Phi Delta Kappan, LXV, No. 3 (November, 1983), pp. 163-165.

5. Edward B. Fiske, "Problem for Education: Commission Looks to Rise in Federal Role, While Reagan Looks to a Diminished Role," New York Times, April 28, 1983, p. B-15.

6. Ben J. Wattenberg, Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute, quoted in Albert Shanker, "Where We Stand: Report Didn't Tell Full School Story," New York Times, June 12, 1983, p. E-7.

7. Ibid.

8. Ellen Goodman, "Grading Time," Washington Post, May 10, 1983, p. A-19.

9. "Alarming Education," Nation, CCXXXVI, No. 19 (May, 1983), pp. 594-595.

10. Patrick Buchanan, "Money Ain't the Problem in This Case," Dominion Post (Morgantown, WV), May 6, 1983, p. 4-A.

11. Ibid.

12. Karen MacPherson, "State of American Learning Debated," Times-Tribune, August 26, 1983.

13. Albert Shanker, "Where We Stand: Reform Is In the Air...But It Will Take Money; A Critical Year Ahead for Education," New York Times, September 11, 1983, p. E-9.

14. Fred M. Hechinger, "Perception of Schools Vs. Reality," New York Times, September 6, 1983.

15. _____, "American Education: Focus on Potential Needs to Maintain Forward Course," NASSP Bulletin, LXVII, No. 464 (September, 1983), pp. 29-37.